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Belief and Unbelief #2
Mark 9:14-27
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A young boy, thirteen years of age, was invited by his pastor to become part of a Confirmation Class and to join the Church. The boy hesitated and with the particular integrity of adolescence, indicated that he wasn't sure he believed "all that stuff". When the minister asked what he meant by "all that stuff" he said: "You know - The Apostles Creed: descended into hell - sitteth on the right hand of God - the quick and the dead - all that stuff."

The minister asked the young fellow to take the creed and write out what he believed and what he did not believe. The "what I believe" list was quite brief. It included: "Jesus Christ, our Lord, Suffered under Pontious Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried." And then after a large empty space, "the forgiveness of sins".

The "what I cannot believe" column contained the rest of the creed: "God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and earth, His only Son, conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, descended into hell, rose again from the dead, ascended into Heaven, right hand of God, quick and the dead, Holy Ghost, Catholic Church, Resurrection of the Body, Life Everlasting." (Half-Way to Faith, Lord Eccles, in Theodore Parker Ferris, The Things We Live By p. 11).

I am suggesting that the brash honesty of youth allowed the young boy to articulate what is a rather common dilemma among adults. The problem is that for many people Christian faith is defined as the believing of certain doctrines. The fact, of which I am quite certain, is that many people shy away from the Church because they do not understand or do not believe the doctrines which define Christian faith. Another fact, of which I am equally certain, is that many people in the Church have serious reservations about particular doctrines, recite the creeds with their fingers crossed and then feel guilty about their inability honestly to believe what they assume Christians have to believe.

Now from our beginnings we Presbyterians have put a premium on good theology and right belief. While other branches of the Church have concentrated on the heart, we have held out for the head. We have produced, accordingly, more theology and more theologians. When a Presbyterian is asked what the Church believes he points to a book - The Book of Confessions, a relatively hefty volume containing nine separate statements of faith. We think the theological enterprise is important, that the content of one's faith does matter, that we are called to love God with our minds.

Thus, I will be preaching a series of sermons this fall focusing on basic Christian beliefs. In October a study and discussion group will meet on Sunday evenings to explore the great theological motifs of our tradition.

But let it be clearly understood at the outset that we skate on thin ice indeed when we identify Christian faith with believing certain doctrines. The effect of this identification - and I fear that we are guilty of it - is to damage our credibility with those who are seeking and to turn away from the gates the searcher for truth. The effect is also, it seems to me, to cut us off from the Good News of the Gospel which is that God loves us quite apart from what we are able to believe: that God moves toward us with love regardless of our theological sophistication or orthodoxy. Jesus, after all, did not administer entrance exams

religion continues to be regarded as a body of truth contained in its creeds, and the Christian life a growing into the acceptance of the truth of those creeds accompanied by the eradication of all doubt and uncertainty. A Christian is a person who "knows". The trouble with the Church, Bishop Pike wrote before he died and as he was being branded a heretic, is that it presents what is historically conditioned as eternal: "What is relative is presented as absolute, what is packaging is presented as the product, what is fallible is presented as infallible...what is customary and machinery is presented as final reality; the notions of men are presented as the mind of God, the words of men are presented as the will of God." (A Time for Christian Candor, p. 23).

There is an inherent human tendency to endow my understanding of things with timeless truth. That tendency becomes demonic when magnified in institutions. The nonsense of Nazism became believable first and then holy truth in the packed arena at Nuremberg. Ideas so patently silly that an individual would laugh at them in the neutral quiet of his own study became reality in the movement called national Socialism.

That is part of the human dilemma. And when religion is infected by it: when religion presents itself as the ultimate definer of truth: when religious faith is knowledge: when personal piety is defined as believing certain intellectual concepts to be true we are well on the way toward that saddest of human frailties - religious arrogance.

The Christian church has always had to contend with it. In the year 395, Eunomius, a Bishop in the early church, wrote, "I know God as well as He knows Himself." I've talked with people today who presume the same intimate and personal acquaintance with the Almighty. Much to the point is David Roberts' observation in Psychotherapy and A Christian View of Man, that knowing God completely "provides the insecure person with a sense of superior righteousness". Roberts taught my generation of theological students that in a secular age, with anxiety running high, insecure people "need to find ways to make their faith impregnable against criticism coming from without or from skeptical inclinations within".

Where, after all, did we ever get the idea that we could know and understand God? Where did we ever get the idea that the function of religious faith is to provide an answer for every question? Not in the Bible, certainly. There is an inscrutable quality, a mystery, an "unknownness" about the Jahweh of the Old Testament. When Job brought his case before the heavenly court God spoke out of the whirlwind and in essence asked Job who in the world he thought he was. "My ways are not your ways", says the Lord of the Old Testament and the Psalmist responded appropriately, "Thou dost beset me behind and before, and layest thy hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it." (Psalm 139:5-6).

The human presumption to know and understand God completely is, frankly, the ultimate arrogance. It is perhaps the sin the Genesis writer had in mind in the story of a tree the fruit of which would make men like God. If God is God, He will not be known fully: there will always be mystery and a sense of otherness on the part of those who seek Him.

Faith - Christian Faith - is not the sum of all the creeds. It is not the believing of beliefs and the eradication of all doubt. In fact, faith begins somewhere at the opposite end of the scale from knowledge with the admission that it is

not within the sphere of the human mind to circumscribe the Almighty. It begins somewhere near the point at which the father of the sick boy cried out, "I believe: help my unbelief."

The theologians and philosophers have always known that. Thus Martin Luther light-heartedly admitted that he was not always equipped to "know how things are going in the heavenly majesty". (Martin Marty, Varieties of Unbelief, p.35). The philosopher Pascal mused, "I am astonished at the boldness with which people undertake to speak about God." And Harry Emerson Fosdick, the great 20th century preacher, said, "All intelligent faith in God has behind it a background of humble agnosticism." (Leslie Waltherhead, The Christian Agnostic, p.36). The possibility of authentic, honest belief begins when we acknowledge that we do not know and will never know all there is to God.

And then it's a little like falling in love. That delightful human phenomenon does not occur as a result of collecting and analyzing all the available data on the beloved. In fact, if we knew all there is to know about the other person beforehand we might never fall hopelessly and wonderfully in love. Love comes first; love happens and then over the years and decades of deepening relationship understanding is added. So, I would suggest, it is with Christian faith. First there is an impulse - love, trust, devotion; and then over the years knowledge comes and the ancient creeds which once meant nothing begin to have significance of individual experience.

"I believe in the Holy Ghost" may be an awkward and untenable proposition. But the person who has tried the life of obedient faith and has felt on occasion the power of God healing and helping and agitating knows exactly what it means. The "Communion of Saints" - surely an obsolete ecclesiastical formula: but the person who has lost a dear one and who reflects on the eternity of God's love for that person knows exactly what it means. "Maker of heaven and earth":surely an embarassing sentiment in the arena of physical science. But the person who has sat by the sea and watched the sun dip behind the horizon in fragile hues of red and violet and pink knows exactly what it means.

Reconstruct it one more time. "All things are possible to him who believes." "I believe: help my unbelief."

It wasn't what the father stammered that healed his son. In fact, he admitted that he didn't measure up. He believed and did not believe. He was somewhere between the two. Jesus accepted that at face value. It wasn't the man's powerful faith that healed the boy: it was the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

So our standing with our father God does not depend on how much we can believe. It depends only on His love for us: and how much we are willing to accept that - and live in it - and give thanks for it - and be glad about it.

We have postponed, many of us, the time when we will have a vital faith. We assume that someday, somehow, all the pieces will fit together and we will know and believe. But the great invitation of the Gospel now is to trust Him, respond in joy and gratitude to the love you have seen, follow Him as you sense Him leading.

There is a line in an old Gospel song we don't sing much any more that goes:

"Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fighting and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!"

So the invitation is to come, just as we are. "I believe: help my unbelief.." The promise is that the humble, hesitant and halting confession is enough.

Amen.

could be as coldly rational and skeptical as the best of them. He said something which I have seen in print many times since, but which at the time made all the difference in the world to me. I have never forgotten it. It is still the essence of the Gospel for me. He said simply, "The crucifixion is not so much the story of what people did to Jesus of Nazareth as it is the story of what God has done for us." That is my inarticulate, but precious, doctrine of the Cross.

What happened to Jesus Christ was for us. However we adorn, define and describe it, it was done for our sakes.* And because of that; because the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is something God has done for us, it is a Magnificent Defeat.

"Where is the wise man?", St. Paul asked, "Where is the skillful debater?" They were seen kneeling before a manger: not theologizing, philosophizing, arguing, discussing - but kneeling in awe before an indescribable gift.

So - wise people, men, women and children, will be found kneeling before His Cross.

Amen.

God, our Father, as we move closer to the observance of our Lord's death, open our minds and hearts to its magnificence. Give us moments of quiet reflection so that in days ahead we might kneel before the Cross in awe and reverence and love.
Amen.

* Whatever else it was, it was God's love poured out in the human family and in each of us personally. Whatever else it was, it was the Creator God confronting the worst thing that can happen, the finest living, with resurrection, strength & love. A dear friend said to me once - in the middle of a spiritual dry period "the cross is not what people did to Jesus so much as it is what God did for us."

5. I find it somewhat odd that whenever Colson sought the will of God it led him to seek further world-wide publicity.

6. As a lawyer, I find most distressing Colson's lack of feeling for his chosen profession. When Ellsburgh turned over the Pentagon papers to the Times--Nixon, Colson, Krogh and all of them should have left the determination of Ellsburgh's guilt or innocence to the due process of law--especially the responsible United States Attorney. But no, they had to recruit the press to discredit Mr. Ellsburgh. In my view criminal responsibility should be determined only in court.

7. And, when Colson was indicted and was in fact innocent of the charges, he should have plead not guilty and made the prosecution prove its case. Since they could not do so he would have been acquitted. That is how the criminal law is supposed to work.

But, no. Since he now had found religion and felt guilty about his past life he had to find something he could plead guilty to. A bad precedent from the point of view of the criminal justice system.

9. In short--Colson is not so much a symbol of the new power of religion as the old power of Christianity to heal the wounds of those who once knew the truth and forgot it for a while.

Sincerely,

Bill

William W. Milligan